

Adrian Hunter

Obscured Hurts: The Civil War Writing of Henry James and Ambrose Bierce

In his renowned study of Civil War literature, Daniel Aaron classes Henry James, along with Henry Adams, William Dean Howells and Mark Twain, among the “malingerers.”¹ In so doing, Aaron favors the psychological interpretation of the notorious “obscure hurt” that James said prevented him from serving. According to this line of thought, James had in fact neither “castrated himself nor developed a hernia, but...had suffered a psychic wound.”² In contrast to the “malingerers,” Aaron gives us the “combatants,” among them Ambrose Bierce, whose writing on the War is a model of clarity, “uncanny visual sense,” and relish for “the details of the soldier’s “trade.”³ For Aaron, Bierce’s fiction contains the kind of “solidity of specification” James claimed to admire yet failed to deliver. But are James and Bierce so very different in their treatment of the War as Aaron says? Distinguishing between them on the basis of their divergent experiences of the conflict obscures important similarities in their writing, while marking a factitious border between the “fighter” and the “stay-at-home,” the man of action and the man of thought. In their depictions of the Civil War, at home and at the front, James and Bierce have much in common. In particular, they are both concerned with the spectacle of the war-traumatized male, and they both struggle to deal with this figure in terms of their culture’s definition of masculinity. The strategies they devise in their writing in order to disguise the presence of the hysterical man reveal the impact the War had on late-19th-century versions of American manhood.

The bulk of James’ Civil War writing is found in his late retrospective memoir, *Notes of a Son and Brother*.⁴ There he reflects on what it was like to be a stay-at-home during the War, mysteriously enfeebled, hindered from violence, cut off from the age. It was, he writes, a matter of “living inwardly, compared, that is, to the immense and prolonged outwardness, outwardness

naturally at the very highest pitch, that was the general sign of the [Civil War] situation” (227). In his few War stories, James returns to the idea of a population of “inwards” left behind during this defining episode in American history. Largely, of course, the “inwards” are women. Gertrude Whittaker, in the story “Poor Richard,” defines the role of such women in relation to the War: they register its momentum, account for it in the heart; in short, they *think* about it:

War is an infamy, Major, though it *is* your trade. It’s very well for you, who look at it professionally, and for those who go and fight; but it’s a miserable business for those who stay at home, and do the thinking and the sentimentalizing. It’s a miserable business for women; it makes us more spiteful than ever.⁵

By contrast, the world of the male combatant is deliberately thought/less, destitute of depth or sentiment. For the soldiers in James’ stories, emotion amounts to a self-inflicted wound in the combat zone. As young officer Jack Ford, in “The Story of a Year,” tells his fiancée, Lizzie Crowe, “if I find your memory makes a milksop of me, I shall thrust you out of the way without ceremony” (23). What really goes on at the front line, between men, is beyond James’ reckoning, and he doesn’t propose to imagine it. In this respect, Lizzie is not the only absentee from the world of exclusively male contest: the narrator, too, misses out: “I have no intention of following Lieutenant Ford to the seat of war,” he tells us: “My own taste has always been for unwritten history, and my present business is with the reverse of the picture” (30).⁶

It was with the “reverse of the picture,” the “unwritten history” of the stay-at-home, that James was concerned in his *Notes of a Son and Brother*: There the one left behind was a man, James himself, the cause of his confinement the infamous “wound.” Precisely what the “wound” consisted in, by what mechanism it occurred, and in what ways it disabled the author are not made clear. Instead, James stirs up confusion at the scene by conflating his personal hurt and the nation’s embattlement:

Beyond all present notation the interlaced, undivided way in which what had happened to me, by a turn of fortune’s hand, in twenty odious minutes, kept company of the most unnatural—I can call it nothing less—with my view of what was hap-

pening, with the question of what might still happen, to everyone about me, to the country at large: it so made of these marked disparities a single vast visitation. One had the sense, I mean, of a huge comprehensive ache, and there were hours at which one could scarce have told whether it came most from one's own poor organism, still so young and so meant for better things, but which had suffered particular wrong, or from the enclosing social body, a body rent with a thousand wounds and that thus treated one to the honor of a sort of tragic fellowship (277).

James' device is to collapse his own minor hurt into the national plight, proposing that he is unable to distinguish one from the other. The ache is "comprehensive" in the sense that it contains all points of origin, personal and political; it is not, however, "comprehensive" as that word relates to "understanding," for the hurt is to remain, as he has already told us, "obscure." The blur James creates in this passage is to allow for the improbable conclusion he wishes to draw, namely that he was in a "sort of tragic fellowship" with those who fought. He avoids specifying the nature of his injury in this passage by enacting a ratio upon it, placing the event itself and his response to it at the time within a larger narrative about the national significance of the War.

The explanation Leon Edel gives for James' mysterious malady is that he was suffering from an attack of neurotic anxiety such as his father had suffered when Henry was a boy. According to Edel, the physical injury sustained at Newport amounted to little more than a strained back; indeed, Henry Sr.'s Boston physician is said to have found nothing at all the matter with the young man. Edel goes on to describe James as one "[t]emperamentally unsuited for soldiering, unable to endure violence," having long since "substituted acute and close observation of life for active participation in it."⁷ The implication is that the physical injury was conjured up in order to mask the reality of a psychological indisposition. Now, the obvious reason for James' conversion of his anxiety into a bodily lameness is that it offered to preserve his honor as well as his life; as Kelly Cannon puts it, the injury allowed James to meet "the social expectations of manhood."⁸ But a more precise motivation is evident in the *Notes*, and that is his desire to maintain "a sort of tragic fellowship" with those actually fighting the war. Throughout the memoir, James recounts his determined efforts to establish adequate homosocial relations

with fighting men. Recalling a visit paid to a regiment of Union soldiers at Portsmouth Grove, he reflects that the “great point” of his meeting with the troops was not just that he achieved intimacy with them, but that he did so by observing their own strict codes of personal engagement, their “pathetically ‘knowing’ devices” (292). He recognizes the importance of reticence among men, firm boundaries in speech, a limited expressiveness conducted indirectly through “rueful humor,” “stoic reserve,” an “esoteric vernacular” (292-3). James is watchful of his own natural loquacity because he understands how delicate the contract is that exists between these men, how much it depends on keeping the self in check. Thinking back on the perplexing account of the “wound,” it can be argued that in order to preserve this “fellowship” with other men, and to maintain his likeness to them *as* men, James casts his disabling anxiety, his fear, as something else: in Freudian terms, he converts it into a physical symptom—the “wound.” For the Freudian, the extent of James’ awareness of the process of conversion is not important; rather, the crucial thing is to appreciate, as Elaine Showalter describes, that neurosis is a compromise established by the psyche between the instinct towards self-preservation (i.e. the desire not to go to war) and the “prohibitions against deception or flight” imposed by society and its ideals of “duty, patriotism, and honor.”⁹ In other words, James produces an “acceptable” physical condition, rather than the culturally *un*acceptable affliction of anxiety, in order to free himself from this predicament. He converts his internal condition into an external one, the better to manage it.

In the *Notes* and in the stories, the stay-at-home male struggles to live up to the version of masculine conduct that fighting men promote. The only way he can do this is to establish the identity of his condition with theirs, carrying a bodily wound as they do, curbing his hysterical, effeminate talkativeness in favor of their manly taciturnity. James depicts himself as an intensely committed participant in the national calamity, a sharer in the contagious tension of the time, engaged from his supine position in what he calls “a negative of combat...firmly parallel to action in the tented field” (281). He invokes the idea of the stay-at-home’s experience as the flip-side of combat, the “reverse of the picture.” He too is a veteran; his state of “inwardness” is not different from the “outwardness” to which his soldier-friends are compelled, but coterminous with it. Similarly, in the stories “Poor Richard” and “The Story of A Year,” both the principal male characters express their wish to belong to the “tragic fellowship” of War veterans. At one point, Richard, in his tale, finds himself in competition for Gertrude’s hand with two officers of the Union

Army. He senses his inadequacy in comparison with these men and so enlists in order to correct the deficit. For Richard, adopting the discipline of war is a way of curbing the disfiguring emotionalism he suffers from. By inclination a stay-at-home, he is naturally confessional, sentimental, talkative, repeatedly declaring his love for Gertrude. After the war, he is far more restrained (repressed, one might say), calling on Gertrude “dutifully and respectfully” (178), content in the knowledge that no woman would ever again be able to afflict him as she once had. In “The Story of a Year,” as we have seen, Jack finds it a necessary condition of his soldiering to banish all thoughts of Lizzie and what her love might mean to him, for fear that it will make him susceptible of injury by other men.

I dwell on James because his complex evasiveness over the matter of his anxiety, his strategic conversion of the psychological into the physical, is a feature too of Ambrose Bierce’s Civil War writing. Bierce, of course, had a very different experience of the War from James. He saw action, volunteering for the Union Army in 1861 and mustering out a lieutenant. Nevertheless, he shares with James a deep interest in the dynamics of male relationships, and particularly in how forms of male anxiety undermine or threaten the normal codes of masculine socialization. Despite the ubiquity of the hysterical or battle-traumatized male in his fiction, Bierce, like James, consistently disavows what Peter Middleton terms the “inward gaze.”¹⁰ In his writing, the successful soldier is only reckoned with in terms of his outward conduct: indeed, his very identity as a combatant depends on not investigating his mind. Conversely, the soldier who fails to perform adequately in battle has his failure explained in terms of his excessive “inwardness.” In both cases, competent masculinity is presented as a triumph of deed over thought. The stories I will look at below all demonstrate how Bierce diverts attention from the psychological content of his soldiers’ behavior.

“Killed at Resaca” is the story of Lieutenant Herman Brayle, the best man in an Ohio regiment, narrated by one of his comrades. Brayle is a kind of national ideal for the narrator, “more than six feet...with light hair and gray-blue eyes...a gentleman’s manners, a scholar’s head, and a lion’s heart.”¹¹ What is more, he has risen discreetly in the ranks during a time of shrill “loquacity” (40). Brayle is noted in particular for his spectacular acts of heroism on the battlefield, deeds that increasingly border on the downright foolhardy and senseless, to the point that he endangers the security of the regiment. Despite this, he is admired by his comrades for the manner of his courage:

Let me do justice to a brave man's memory; in all these need-
less exposures of life there was no visible bravado nor subse-
quent narration. In the few instances when some of us had
ventured to remonstrate, Brayle had smiled pleasantly and
made some light reply, which, however, had not encouraged a
further pursuit of the subject. Once he said:

“Captain, if ever I come to grief by forgetting your advice,
I hope my last moments will be cheered by the sound of your
beloved voice breathing into my ear the blessed words, ‘I told
you so.’” (42)

Brayle's quality is his lack of “narration,” his taciturnity: he is a doer, not a talker. Elsewhere he is praised for lacking “affectation” and for being “intensely dramatic, but in no degree theatrical” (43). It is not simply that he is brave, but that his courage comes unblemished by expressiveness, by any effeminate loquacity. The soldier is noted for his bluff masculinist humor, the same quality James took pleasure in among the troops at Portsmouth Grove. (In Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, young Henry Fleming—another Civil War combatant whose anxiety imperils his manly identity—has his inadequacy defined in terms of his exclusion from the bleak humor of his comrades: he cannot understand how they “move with glee, almost with song”¹² in the face of such horror.) The function of self-effacing humor among these fighting men is to encode fear, to firm up the boundaries of their masculinity by not giving way to a potentially damaging “excess” of feeling. The man who says too much, the leaky vessel, is viewed with suspicion in this environment. As Ben Knights observes, masculinity is defined in such narratives “by a high degree of management over the calls the world makes upon a man's identity and inner resources.”¹³ In Bierce's stories in particular, introspection is displaced by humor or, more commonly, by action; male character is defined and endorsed in terms of its “outwardness.” The narrator's analysis of Brayle's madcap conduct in “Killed at Resaca” is tellingly limited in this way:

It is easy to condemn this kind of thing [Brayle's reckless conduct], and not very difficult to refrain from imitation, but it is impossible not to respect, and Brayle was liked none the less for the weakness which had so heroic an expression. We wished he were not a fool, but he went on that way to the end,

sometimes hard hit, but always returning to duty about as good as new (43).

The “respect” for Brayle’s conduct marks a refusal to deal with him psychologically. His behavior is reckless, suicidal, dissociative, yet “foolishness” is as far as the narrator is prepared to probe into Brayle’s motivations. It is as though to admit the psychological would be to threaten the terms of his identity as a soldier. The ending to the story is explicable in the same terms. There the narrator visits Marian Mendenhall, Brayle’s former lover. We discover that Brayle’s madcap courage was the product of his once being convicted of cowardice by her. She wrote to him then:

“Mr Winters, whom I shall always hate for it, has been telling that at some battle in Virginia, where he got his hurt, you were seen crouching behind a tree. I think he wants to injure you in my regard, which he knows the story would do if I believed it. I could bear to hear of my soldier lover’s death, but not of his cowardice.”

These were the words which on that sunny afternoon, in a distant region, had slain a hundred men. Is woman weak? (45)

It is an interesting final question, displacing the enquiry from male to female weakness. The narrator is in no doubt that Brayle was the bravest man he ever saw; but was he not in fact the greatest hysteric he ever saw? Surely Brayle’s actions were not a cancellation of his formerly fearful behavior, but a further manifestation of it. Yet the significance of Brayle’s behavior is missed by the narrator because of his absolute adherence to the codes of reticent, selfless masculinity. He considers Brayle “the truest and bravest heart that ever beat” (45), when in fact he was a man spurred to a frightful self-destructiveness because of the intolerable demands of the role he must act up to. The narrator refuses to tell Marian Mendenhall of the “heroic” nature of Brayle’s death because he thinks she is not deserving of this knowledge. Those who really “knew” Brayle were his comrades and even the Confederate troops who “honored the fallen brave” (44) by a cessation of hostilities on the battlefield when he died. The irony Bierce seems to want us to grasp is that Brayle’s heroism was triggered by the complacent thoughtlessness of a vacuous woman. But this irony evades the issue of Brayle’s psychological state by placing responsibility for his actions in the hands of an external agent,

Marian Mendenhall; to adopt the phrase I used in discussion of James, Bierce enacts a ratio upon male interiority by converting the story into a tale of betrayal by woman. The convenience of the betrayal explanation is that Brayle's masculinity emerges intact, if not revitalized, by his subsequent conduct on the battlefield, and the issue of his earlier cowardice is cancelled out.

Throughout his war stories, Bierce, like James, considers the admission of psychological weakness a threat to masculine character itself. In "Killed at Resaca" this means he must divert attention from the inward to the outward in order still to affirm Brayle. Yet eccentric, traumatized behavior by men in battle is a repeated concern of his writing, as stories such as "George Thurston," "A Horseman in the Sky," "One Officer, One Man," and "A Son of the Gods" make clear. In the last of these, a combatant narrator tells of a young officer who rides out on to the front line in full dress uniform, atop a white stallion, in order to draw the enemy's fire and so reveal their position to the Union infantry. He is shot to pieces, and to add insult the "vain devotion" (29) of this "gallant man—this military Christ" (27) brings about only the death and defeat of his comrades. This bitter concluding irony is a characteristic gesture of Bierce's War fiction, telling of the destitution of the old myths of heroism and presenting a fatalistic, defeatist vision of battle in which the noble and the simple-minded alike are consumed, or consume themselves. But in order for that irony to succeed, the young officer's actions need to be read as gallant: it is not the soldier but this complex modern war that has robbed the world of heroism. Yet for us to read the officer as heroic, as the narrator does, we need to need to close off the troubling aspects of his behavior that lurk in the text:

Gallop[ing] rapidly along in the edge of the open ground comes a young officer on a snow-white horse. His saddle blanket is scarlet. What a fool! No one who has ever been in action but remembers how naturally every rifle turns toward the man on a white horse; no one but has observed how a bit of red enraged the bull of battle. That such colors are fashionable in military life must be accepted as the most astonishing of all the phenomena of human vanity. They would seem to have been devised to increase the death-rate.

The young officer is in full uniform, as if on parade. He is all agleam with bullion—a blue-and-gold edition of the Poetry of War. A wave of derisive laughter runs abreast of

him all along the line. But how handsome he is!—with what careless grace he sits his horse! (25)

The derision soon gives way to pure admiration as the young officer presents himself to certain death. But what is he doing dressed in full ceremonial garb? Why this effete splash of color on the disconsolate battlefield? The young officer is suicidal; at best he is acting in a dissociative manner. John Talbott, in an article on combat trauma in the Civil War, has found evidence of this kind of behavior in several high-ranking officers in the Union army. As he describes, dissociation “is an adaptive strategy” which “allows a person under stress to continue functioning, although often in an autonomic and sometimes inappropriate way.”¹⁴ But in order for the ironic structure of Bierce’s story to function, and for the young officer to be construed as heroic rather than damaged, the narration must draw a blank on the content of his mind. We are therefore left with this fleeting image of horrified madness while Bierce diverts to his wider story about the futility of warfare. Once again, interiority is refused, and a ratio enacted upon the issue of male psychological trauma.

The complexity of this relationship between masculinity and psychology in Bierce’s writing is perhaps best displayed in “One Officer, One Man,” a story that differs from “Killed at Resaca” and “A Son of the Gods” because it does not offer any endorsement of its central character. The story tells of a young Captain Graffenreid in his first encounter on the battlefield with an armed enemy. Early on we are told that Captain Graffenreid is suspected of inadequacy by his men because the privilege of a military education has kept him from the front line until now. Graffenreid is therefore keen to earn the “respect of his men and the companionship of his brother officers” (91). In the event, faced with the first bombardment from the enemy he experiences an attack of hysterical anxiety, exhibiting symptoms including mutism, temporary loss of consciousness and uncontrollable movements of the limb. Rooted to the spot with terror when a corpse falls at his feet, Graffenreid’s one decisive act in the battle is his last: he kills himself by falling on his sword.

As in James’ stories, and “Killed at Resaca,” “One Officer, One Man” depicts the anxious or hysterical soldier as one who fails to act due to his excessive and disfiguring “inwardness.” We are told that Graffenreid is disabled by too much thought: “From inaction had come introspection. He sought rather to analyze his feelings than distinguish himself by courage and devotion. The result was profoundly disappointing” (93). Again, it is the fail-

ure of the man to engage with the world, to develop a strategy of action for displacing his anxiety, that is seen as the cause of his inadequacy. In contrast to Graffenreid's messy, self-polluting intellectualism—his “fancy” (94)—is the narrator's severe ironic self-containment. For the narrator, the incapable soldier lacks definition in the world: he is permeable, disorderly, inward, unable to take control of his environment through decisive action. The effective man, on the other hand, is readily locatable, and appropriately speechless:

An army in line-of-battle awaiting attack, or prepared to deliver it, presents strange contrasts. At the front are precision, formality, fixity, and silence. Toward the rear these characteristics are less and less conspicuous, and finally, in point of space, are lost altogether in confusion, motion and noise. The homogeneous becomes heterogeneous. Definition is lacking; repose is replaced by an apparently purposeless activity; harmony vanishes in hubbub, form in disorder. Commotion everywhere and ceaseless unrest. The men who do not fight are never ready. (90)

Graffenreid's weakness finds it correlative in the gossipy disarray of the rear ranks whose “apparently purposeless activity” presumably includes such episodes of introspection as the young officer is said to have indulged. An opposition is therefore established between Graffenreid and Bierce's narratorial voice. The latter's ironic detachment is meant to define by contrast Graffenreid's failing by showing us the mode of conduct that *can* survive the battleground; and that mode is purposely *un*reflective. The story observes the symptoms of the young officer's trauma—the “strain upon his nervous organism was insupportable. He grew hot and cold by turns. He panted like a dog, and then forgot to breathe...” (94)—but there is no consideration of these symptoms as produced by the intolerable demands of combat; rather, it is implied that Graffenreid's gathering hysteria is produced by his temperamental unsuitability to battle, by his failure to maintain a “manly” control over his emotions and behavior.

During the Civil War there was, as John Talbott explains, “no label like shell shock, battle fatigue or post-traumatic stress disorder to help explain and legitimize a mysterious condition, no category short of lunacy to account for peculiar behavior.”¹⁵ That failure to “legitimize” combat trauma was a failure to name it, to differentiate it from known categories such as lunacy, malin-

gering, dereliction or cowardice. Bierce's stories reveal the same dependence on the conventional descriptors of male behavior in order to produce their ironic commentary on the futility of modern warfare. Despite the fascination evident throughout his work with the subject of anxiety and war neurosis, Bierce refuses to examine how it might be produced by the very intolerable ideals of male conduct that make the prosecution of war possible.

To return to Daniel Aaron, the Civil War was for him "unwritten" because of the reluctance of many American writers to deal with the fundamental issue of the conflict—race. But the War was "unwritten" in another sense too, as I have shown here, even by those who addressed it directly. Both James and Bierce are evasive about the way war inflicts psychological and emotional damage on men, whether active in service or not. Both writers find it necessary to convert internal conflict into stories of wounds and the making of men—coherent narratives of "outwardness." In this, they reflect their culture's struggle to square mental frailty with conventional definitions of manhood. The spectacle of the hysterical man threatened what Showalter calls the late Victorian "ideology of absolute and natural difference between women and men."¹⁶ Hysteria was considered a "female malady," a product of the susceptible feminine constitution, hence the euphemisms such as "railway spine" devised in order to emphasize the distinctly physiological (as opposed to psychological) male condition. It is telling that Silas Weir Mitchell's infamous "rest cure" (initially developed, ironically enough, from his treatment of Civil War veterans) was applied to women rather than to men, the belief being that male maladies of the mind should be prescribed a dose of vigorous physical exercise. The 1890s doctrine of "strenuous life" advocated by Theodore Roosevelt among others represents a further subordination to the body of the male psyche. In fact, it is not until the First World War that physicians in Europe and America come to acknowledge that men involved in war may suffer injury that is not simply or wholly physical, and the diagnosis of "shell-shock" is finally made. Reading James and Bierce, we see how significant the will to make that diagnosis is, not only to the history of modern warfare, but to the story of masculinity itself.

Notes

1. Daniel Aaron, *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 1973).
2. Aaron, 107. For Leon Edel's account of the wound, on which Aaron draws, see Leon Edel, *Henry James: The Untried Years 1843-1870* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1953), 171-86.
3. Aaron, 183-4.

4. Henry James, *Notes of a Son and Brother* (London: Macmillan, 1914). Subsequent references to this text are parenthetical.
5. Henry James, *The Tales of Henry James Volume 1*, Maqbool Aziz, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 166. Subsequent references to this volume are parenthetical.
6. On James's interest in characters and narrators who are absented, excused, or excluded from conventional arenas of masculinity, see, for example, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), and Kelly Cannon's *Henry James and Masculinity: The Man at the Margins* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1994).
7. Edel, 174.
8. Cannon, 37.
9. Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1987), 170.
10. Peter Middleton, *The Inward Gaze: Masculinity and Subjectivity in Modern Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).
11. Ambrose Bierce, *The Collected Writings of Ambrose Bierce*, Clifton Fadiman, ed. (New York: Citadel Press, 1996), 41. Subsequent references to this volume are parenthetical.
12. Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage: An Episode of the American Civil War*, Henry Binder, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979), 12.
13. Ben Knights, *Writing Masculinities: Male Narratives in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 126.
14. John Talbott, "Combat Trauma in the American Civil War," *History Today* 46 (March 1996): 42. Elaine Showalter, in a chapter on shell-shock in World War I, points out that officers, such as Siegfried Sassoon, whose "psychological stability was shaky," often dealt with their fear "by reckless acts of combat" (Showalter, 179).
15. Talbott, 41.
16. Showalter, 167-8.

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Adrian Hunter lectures in English Studies at the University of Stirling. He has recently edited James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* for Broadview, is now preparing an edition of Stephen Crane's *Maggie*, and has a book forthcoming on the modernist short story.